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TAGS: [PARM](#) [KCRM](#) [PINR](#) [ASEC](#) [CS](#)
SUBJECT: COSTA RICA'S GROWING FIREARMS PROBLEM

REF: 05 SAN JOSE 2622

Classified By: CHG Russell Frisbie for reasons 1.4 (B&D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Incoming Minister of Public Security Fernando Berrocal filed a formal complaint with the Attorney General's Office on May 30, 2006, based on the disappearance of over 100 weapons, including military assault rifles, grenades, and large quantities of ammunition, from the national armory. The last physical inventory was conducted in 1998. Rumors of irregularities at the armory have surfaced for some time, but serious internal investigation had to wait until former Minister Rogelio Ramos was replaced (reftel). Numerous other weapons have been "stolen" from police forces in the past two years. Many of these weapons are apparently being shipped to the FARC in Colombia, presumably in exchange for drugs. Rising crime rates and a growing sense of insecurity have resulted in many Costa Ricans seeking arms for self-protection. Only a fraction of the weapons are legally registered. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Within days of his swearing-in on May 8, 2006, Public Security Minister Berrocal refused to accept responsibility for the National Armory citing the need for a complete physical inventory. This was unusual since outgoing Minister Ramos said he had just completed an inventory on May 6, which listed 23 pistols missing out of the approximately 50,000 weapons of various types stored in the armory. In response to Berrocal's refusal, Ramos said that he had also called for an internal audit in July of 2005 and had reported all discrepancies to the Attorney General. However, Ramos has changed his story several times over the past year.

How to Lose Control of an Armory

¶3. (U) Like the current complete physical inventory, the last one (in 1998) also resulted from controversy. At that time, an undercover detective had purchased 10,000 rounds of ammunition from the armory's Director just as final preparations were being made to hand over responsibility to an incoming administration. The scandal resulted in a complete physical inventory and revealed that additional large quantities of ammunition, but no weapons, were missing. In 1999, Eric Karolicki was named Director at the armory with support from then-Vice Minister Rogelio Ramos. In 2001, the armory became the sole repository for seized weapons, adding many thousands of weapons to its inventory. Under Karolicki, controls at the armory began to deteriorate. By 2004, an internal audit called the ammunition storage situation at the armory a "ticking time-bomb" and an official subsequently lost a hand to an explosion. Despite the accident, Karolicki received only a mild reprimand from Ramos for an unrelated infraction (carrying an undocumented sub-machine gun for "personal protection").

¶4. (C) In March 2005, armory employees sent an informal letter to Minister Ramos complaining of more irregularities

under Karolicki. The letter alleged serious offenses such as altering serial numbers and falsifying documents, as well as unauthorized access to the armory. However, Ramos took no action. In the wake of June 2005 press reports documenting illegal loans of weapons from the armory to filmmakers, rumors began to circulate about missing weapons and apparent abuses regarding licenses to sell ammunition. In response, Ramos ordered another audit which reported 12 weapons missing. Again Ramos took no action. Finally, in the wake of still more press accounts alleging mistreatment of armory employees by Karolicki, Ramos was forced to replace him in September 2005. Karolicki, however, was named personal adviser to Minister Ramos, effectively squelching any internal investigation of his activities.

15. (C) Karolicki was replaced by his right-hand man, Francisco Ocampo, ensuring no real changes at the armory. In November 2005, the Comptroller's Office demanded an explanation for the lack of response to the 12 missing weapons and for the lack of an annual audit as required by law. In response, Ramos suspended Karolicki for several days and ordered him to pay for the missing weapons which Ramos then claimed were only three pistols. Ramos told the press he had scolded Ocampo for not reporting annual audit results to the Comptroller and the issue appeared to be dead. However, in December 2005, the Judicial Police (OIJ) launched a criminal investigation in response to a highly detailed, anonymous complaint, presumably filed by armory employees. The Ministry's Inspector General (IG) conducted an investigation of his own, whose preliminary results confirmed many of the irregularities alleged in the complaint. The IG then launched a complete physical inventory of the weapons in the armory but ensured that the results would not be ready until after the change of government. Just before leaving office, on May 6 Ramos reported to the Attorney General that his final inventory revealed 23 weapons were missing from the armory. Three weeks later, the armory's new director and the Ministry's Inspector General reported the number at over 100. The actual number of missing weapons may never be known due to incomplete records and the difficulty of accounting for firearms that are homemade or broken into pieces.

Other Police Weapons "Stolen"

16. (U) In July 2005, the three-man police delegation in Venecia, in the district of San Carlos, was charged with complicity in the theft of two M-16 assault rifles and an Uzi sub-machine gun from their police station. The officers faked a domestic violence call and left the station unguarded. The "theft" was "discovered" upon their return. An investigation is ongoing, and the weapons have not been recovered. On May 30, 2006, the same day Berrocal filed his complaint regarding the 100-plus missing weapons at the armory, 25 weapons including 15 M-16 assault rifles, five semi-automatic handguns and five revolvers were reported stolen from a police station in Guacimo, Limon Province. The thieves took only high-value weapons, leaving others behind, and left no sign of forced entry. Most of the weapons, including all of the assault rifles, were found buried on the property of an officer who was alone at the police station for part of the weekend the theft occurred.

Steady Supply for the FARC

17. (C) Stolen weapons generally cross the land border with Panama, where the FARC is apparently the largest customer. On May 27, 2006, Panamanian authorities seized an illegal weapons shipment that included AK-47 assault rifles, grenades, C-4 explosives, rocket launchers, and a large quantity of ammunition. Authorities had tracked the shipment from the Costa Rican border thinking it contained narcotics. Those arrested with the shipment indicated that the weapons came overland from Nicaragua and were destined to the FARC. This was the third such weapons seizure in Panama in the last two months. In April 2005, Panamanian authorities also seized 42 AK-47 assault rifles hidden in a truckload of plantains near the border with Costa Rica. In yet another incident, Costa Rican authorities discovered 48 AK-47 assault

rifles in the province of Puntarenas on July 19, 2005. These weapons were part of a failed arms-for-drugs exchange with the FARC.

Insecure Costa Ricans Arming Themselves-Often Illegally

18. (U) With rising crime rates that increasingly involve handguns and with high-powered weapons being stolen by the very police who are supposed to protect them, many Costa Ricans are acquiring weapons for self-defense. On May 8, the leading daily newspaper published, under a banner headline, a UNESCO study that found Costa Ricans suffer a higher death rate from firearms than do Nicaraguans (El Salvador and Guatemala were not included in the study). The report, which listed 57 countries based on World Health Organization data, came as a shock, even to police officials. According to OIJ statistics, firearms were used in 58.8 percent of homicides in Costa Rica during 2004. This is up from about 50 percent of homicides during the years 1999-2003.

19. (U) Another indication of the country's burgeoning weapons problem and the public's lack of confidence in the police is the growing number of private security guards, many of them armed, often illegally. The roughly 25,000 private security guards in Costa Rica now greatly outnumber the police. The 10,000-member Police force fields less than 2,000 officers at any given time according to Minister Berrocal. Police officials estimate that as much as 10 percent of the population owns a firearm. This would amount to well over 400,000 weapons even if all owners possessed only one weapon each. Low estimates of the number of weapons in private Costa Rican hands range around 280,000. From 1989 through April 2005, only 81,362 weapons had been legally registered with the Directorate for the Control of Arms and Explosives. Clearly the vast majority of weapons in Costa Rica are illegal. Controls on weapons such as checkpoints on the highways and inspections of private security guards are infrequent at best.

Comment

10. Security concerns consistently rank near the top of opinion polls in Costa Rica. The Arias Administration has come to office well aware of the need to reduce the perception of insecurity, both as a matter of domestic policy and before it negatively affects the vital tourism industry. However, the Administration has inherited an ineffective police force that is too small and lacks the resources to accomplish its mission. Corruption scandals at the national armory and instances of police stealing their own weapons are crushing setbacks to efforts at improving the security situation. Meanwhile the flood of cheap illegal weapons fuels crime and multiplies the violence, leading still more Costa Ricans to conclude that their government can no longer provide basic security. Many decide to arm themselves, which feeds into a vicious cycle of violence.

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